

health of the saint can also be found in Michael de la Bedoyere, *Francois de Sales*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

¹⁵ *BM I*, 252

¹⁶ *BM I*, 253

¹⁷ *MO*, 1406

¹⁸ Francis Desramaut, *Spiritualita' Salesiana: Cento Parole Chiave*, (Rome: LAS, 2001), 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Treatise*, 7.4.

²¹ *Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family*, Art. 7. https://www.sdb.org/en/Council_Resources/Salesian_Family/Documents/THE_COMMON_IDENTITY_CARD

²² *Treatise*, 10.1.

²³ This phrase was coined by Henri Bremond and applied to St Francis de Sales in his work of 1916, *Storia del sentiment religioso in Francia dopo la fine delle guerre di religione* (The History of the Religious Sentiment in France at the End of the Wars of Religion). Ref. Francis Desramaut, p. 611.

²⁴ *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2009), Art. 17.

²⁵ ASC, 351, 16-19. In this letter Fr Egidio Vigano', Rector Major speaks especially of the role and contribution of consecrated women in the Church and society.

²⁶ *Common Identity Card*, Art. 19

²⁷ Sisters of Mary Immaculate, *Our Founder, Father Bishop: His Life and Spirituality*, (Krishnagar West Bengal, India, 1997), 56. Ref. also Delia and Ferdinand Kuhn, *The Texas Bishop of Krishnagar*, (Washington DC: Published for Krishnagar Guild, 1957).

²⁸ *BM XI*, 289.

Francis De Sales: Spiritual Director

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St. Francis de Sales was a good spiritual guide: he had experienced spiritual direction; he had guided many people; he had a methodology of guiding people (patiently listened, keenly discerned what the individual was living through, took things to prayer, gave importance to discerning God's Will, stressed on the importance of devout life bearing fruit in daily living); he had the correct concept of spiritual direction (aimed at holiness of life); he was firm and gentle with the directees; he was a co-searcher journeying along with the directee; he directed by his example; he built up intense friendship with those he directed. Many of those he guided rose to the heights of sanctity, e.g. St. Jeanne de Chantal and Blessed Mary of the Incarnation.

1. EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Good shepherds are made from good sheep (St. Augustine). Good spiritual directors emerge from being good spiritual directees. Francis de Sales learned much from community as well as individual spiritual direction. As a student he was helped by the atmosphere of the Capuchins and the Jesuits where he studied. He was guided by learned and spiritually developed people. He was accompanied by a private tutor Fr. Deage, whom he could approach. At Padua he chose Fr. Antonio Possevino SJ, as his spiritual guide. He kept contact with him even later while in Chablais. Later Fr. Pere Fourier SJ was his spiritual guide. This is not to be considered an exhaustive list.

While studying in Paris, Francis de Sales was captivated by the nobleman Henri de Joyeuse who became a Capuchin. He was from a family very close to king Henri III. The King had honoured the Joyeuses with titles of Admiral of France, Cardinal and Marshal. He himself was appointed the Master of the Royal Wardrobe at the age of seventeen. And he was a very close favourite of the Monarch. One day he was driving in Paris with the King. He noticed two Capuchins in their coarse habit walking with difficulty on the muddy path. This made a deep impression on him. Shortly after the death of his wife, he told the King that he wanted to leave the world and become a Capuchin! And he joined them. The Courtier turned Capuchin with a tonsured head, a coarse habit and bare feet made a deep impression on Francis de Sales, that he used to look out for him when he served the Mass. It is also likely that Francis de Sales met two notable English Capuchins, Pere Archange and Benet of Canfield, a convert to Catholicism, who became a leading figure in the seventeenth century mystical revival with his book *Rule of Perfection*. Under the Capuchin influence Francis began to do heavy mortifications such as fasting, hair-shirt and discipline.¹

While studying in the University of Padua, Francis chose Antonio Possevino, a lecturer in Theology, as his spiritual guide. From being an ordinary priest, Possevino, had risen to great heights: Papal Legate for the reconciliation of John III of Sweden to the Church; Nuncio and Vicar-Apostolic of Sweden; Papal Legate to the Tsar the Terrible with a mission of reconciliation between Russia and Poland! He was an ardent advocate of Christian reunion but Rome did not support his advanced views, so he landed up in Padua as a lecturer in Theology! De Sales was attracted to him also because he had preached in Calvinist Chablais in Savoy. Fr. Possevino guided De Sales: (1) To forget about the question of predestination (which was the cause of great trouble on his conscience) till

he had the opportunity to study it thoroughly, and (2) To see in his normal University work and life, the means of spiritual progress. He permitted the bodily mortifications he was already practising.²

Another important influence on Francis while in Padua was the little book *Spiritual Combat*, written anonymously by Fr. Lorenzo Scupoli, a member of the Theatine Order. At that time, Scupoli was living privately in Padua, because of a grave unjust accusation laid against him. It is probable that De Sales met him and that he himself gave him a copy of the book. What is the speciality of this book? In the opening chapter itself it said that the austerities of the body such as fasts, vigils, sleeping on bare ground, walking barefoot, etc. are in themselves not the perfection of Christian Life. Some who do such austerities imagine themselves to be close to God though they were far from Him in their real behaviour and character! - doing their own will, stubborn in their decisions, proud, etc. We see that these had such a tremendous impact on him that they were his own advice to his directees and they are reflected in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*.³

Francis de Sales with Possevino's help formulated for himself a Rule of Life.⁴

1. I shall never despise anyone, nor altogether avoid him. The more so in that it would give the impression of being proud, haughty, severe, arrogant, critical, ambitious, dominating ...
2. I shall talk little, but well so that others may enjoy meeting me again rather than think how boring this would be ...
3. I must always use judgement and prudence, for every rule has its occasional exception, save only the foundation of all rules: nothing against God ...

4. So in life's intercourse I shall always be modest without insolence, free in manner without austerity, gentle without affectation, flexible without contrariness, unless reason require otherwise; welcoming without dissimulation, for men like to get to know those with whom they have to do business ...
5. Since we must often have relations with persons of different qualities, I must be ready to put before some of them only what is exquisite, before others only what is good, before others still only what is indifferent; but never what is evil before any.
6. If I am obliged to be with the great, I shall remain carefully on my guard - they are like fire, approachable but not too close. A good deal of modesty is necessary in their presence, but it must be an open and sincere modesty ...

2. DE SALES' SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Francis de Sales directed "several priests, abbots, religious, ecclesiastics, gentlemen and lawyers, princes and princesses, and persons of every rank rich and poor from different provinces."⁵ Madame Marie Brulart, Abbess Rose Bourgeois, Madame de la Flechere, Madame Granieu, Madame de Charmoisy, Jeanne de Soulfour (who did not persevere in her vocation), Jacqueline Costa, Madame de Chantal, Pierre Poncet, Pierre Petit, Antoine de St. Michel, Bishop Camus, Angelique Arnauld (who later became a Jansenist), and Statesman Antoine Favre are among the illustrious who were directed by Francis de Sales.

He had recourse to personal meetings with the directee and when that was not possible due to distance or lack of time, he wrote letters and small treatises. What he wrote for one he circulated also among his other directees. We have 2100 such letters of spiritual direction, which means that he might have

written ten times more than that number.⁶ His *Introduction to the Devout Life* was born out of these letters.

3. THE ART OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Following are the elements of the art of his spiritual direction:⁷

1. He expected from the directee the following dispositions: confidence in the mercy of God, trust in the spiritual director, indifference to and abnegation of one's own will and determination to follow the divine inspiration.
2. At the beginning the directee was to give a full review of the past.
3. He led them slowly, step by step, gently.
4. He took interest not only in their spiritual well-being but social and cultural affairs as well.
5. He spoke to the heart and not so much to the head.
6. He stressed the excellence of devotion and virtues.
7. He appreciated and encouraged the directees. E.g. He wrote to Madame Bourgeois, Do you think it little what you have already done for the divine office, for the table and similar things?
8. He used gentle persuasion and not compulsion. He said, "We must act on the minds of others as far as possible as the angels do graciously and without coercion."
9. His guidance was always adapted to the vocation, profession, age, condition, situation, temperament and other particularities of the directee.
10. His personality made a mark on them. He practised what he preached to others. They found in him a living example of what he told them to practise.

This was demonstrated in his accompaniment of Jeanne de Chantal.⁸ Before she came to know Francis, she already had a director who had demanded from her four vows: obedience, never to change, to remain secret about their relations, and to speak to him alone about her soul. In the first meeting and confession Francis de Sales insisted that she remain under the spiritual direction of that priest to whom she had made her promises. He was not yet ready to take his place, for he could not see God's Will for her. But he promised to write as often as possible. At their next meeting, she opened her heart to him, telling him the whole story of her life and her soul. He listened to her entire story and left without speaking a word. He prayed the whole night. On the following day she made her general confession. And he told her that it was true that God willed him to take charge of her spiritual conduct. And he gave her a rule of life with the instruction that she must leave out those which she felt were too heavy and that she was to do everything out of love and nothing out of compulsion. One day, he overheard a servant girl of De Chantal lament that she could not sleep well at the thought that she might oversleep and not get up in time to light the fire at 05.00 a.m. for her mistress! So, Francis told De Chantal that her devotion should not inconvenience anyone! And the servants noticed the change that came over their mistress and remarked: Her earlier director made her pray long prayers three times a day and we were annoyed; her new director makes her pray all the day but she inconveniences nobody! The Carmelites had established their convent in Dijon, De Chantal's country. From them she had learned much of the teaching of St. Teresa of Avila and the methods of higher prayer. She was drawn towards it. De Sales wrote to her telling her to learn all she could about the foundation of all the methods of higher prayer but cautioned her that he himself would never leave the plain high road of ordinary prayer to look upon higher forms of prayer as

something normal! Simply because he found it hard to accept the view that preparation was not normally necessary!⁹

Another example of his spiritual direction: Jeanne de Soufour was a novice in a convent in Paris. She was the daughter of one of his friends. Newly appointed Bishop, Francis de Sales, wrote letters of spiritual direction to her.

Simplify your judgement; do not make so many reflections and replies, but go forward simply and with confidence. For you there is only God and you in this world; what remains should not touch you save only in so far as it is God's will and in the way it is God's will. I implore you, do not look around you so much; keep your looking focused on to God and yourself. Never will you see God save as goodness, nor yourself save as misery; and you will see His goodness a blessing for your misery and your misery the object of His goodness and mercy. Dwell on nothing else but this - I mean, of course, fixed, concentrated, conscious dwelling; the rest consider only in passing. Further, do not look closely at the deeds of others nor what they are going to do, but look at them with a simple, good, kindly and loving eye. Do not demand of them more perfection than you have and do not be astonished at the variety of imperfections, for imperfection is no less imperfection because it is extravagant and strange ...

Let us practise the little virtues suited to our littleness. For a small dealer, a small basket. Such virtues are practised running downwards rather than climbing, but they may be best for our legs: patience, helping our neighbours, service, humility, gentle courage, affability, tolerance of our own imperfections, such are the little virtues. I do not mean that we should not climb by prayer, but step by step.¹⁰

4. ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The following are elements of spiritual direction that we gather from Francis de Sales.¹¹

- Spiritual direction is to lead one to a profound experience of God; to discover the work of the Spirit in oneself; to discover God's loving plan for oneself.
- Holiness is for everyone. What a Bishop can achieve, the others could also achieve in their secular lives which God allotted to them. This is the basis of the spiritual direction he gave, a novelty at that time.
- It is a keen observation of the movement of the heart to locate where the root of evil lies. And this was the secret of spiritual direction.
- It is to be guided by the basic truth that we are not made for this world but for eternity, for life with God.
- It is being what we are truly called to be (true and providential vocation): Desiring to be extremely well, what we are!
- It is subordinating all lower desires, even legitimate ones, to the supreme desire for God. Strengthening the higher desire one weakens the power of contrary desires. We do not oppose faults to become perfect but we become perfect to exclude all faults.
- It is practising devotion without annoying others. Others should talk well of it.
- It is making devotion manifested in consecration to one's duty.
- It is acquiring a real love for solitude in the midst of work. It can be done, as far as possible, by avoiding vain conversation, gossip, distracting reading, and concentrating on what is compatible with professional affairs.
- It is leading to acquiring a habit of active recollection: exercise of the presence of God. God is present

everywhere in a very special way in one's heart. One meets him in this temple of one's heart through spontaneous prayers.

- It is learning to be faithful to the holy inspiration (interior attractions, motions, acts of self-reproach and remorse, lights and conceptions that God works in us): inspirations from God are always reasonable and incline us towards something better.

5. QUALITIES OF A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

St. Francis de Sales taught that a spiritual director was necessary for one to be guided securely on the path of perfection. He found support in St. John of Avila who said, "You will never find the will of God with such certainty than by following the path of this humble obedience so much recommended and practised by all the devout persons of the past."¹² and in St. Louis' deathbed instruction to his son, "Make your confession frequently, choose a confessor, a suitable one who is a prudent man who can teach you with certainty to do the things you need to do."¹³ Francis acknowledged that spiritual directors were rare to find: one in a thousand; one in a ten thousand! He also gave the qualities that one should look for in the spiritual guide: full of charity, full of knowledge and full of prudence.¹⁴

St. Francis de Sales was truly that 'one in ten thousand' whom many approached for spiritual direction and found the safe and secure path to perfection. He enshrined in himself the qualities of a good spiritual director.

5.1 Fatherly

Francis de Sales was an example of fatherly love towards all his directees. He was very patient, kind and gentle towards everyone, more so in spiritual direction. He wrote in *Introduction to the Devout Life* that just as a mother carries

her child in her bosom not feeling the burden because of her tender love for the child, so also the spiritual guide should possess a fatherly or motherly heart to bestow tender love for the one who is directed.¹⁵

5.2 Perpetual Learner

Francis de Sales was a perpetual learner. In his preface to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he said that he was writing about devout life without being devout himself! And since 'A good way to learn is to study; a better way is to listen, and the best way is to teach.' he was engraving devotion on the minds of others, in the hope of becoming devout himself.¹⁶

His direction of others contributed to his own growth in knowledge and devotion. E.g. De Chantal was attracted to Carmelite life. De Sales kept her desire for the mystical heights in check, while learning all the time himself about the varieties of spiritual experience which would be useful to himself and to the growing number of souls he was guiding.¹⁷ Another example: In 1607 when De Chantal asked him if he made a daily meditation, he wrote, "My daughter, do so and ask me always about the state of my soul, for I know well that your curiosity in this comes from the great love you have for me. Yes, my daughter, I make my mental prayer, for I never miss a day, unless it be on a Sunday because of confessions. God gives me the strength to rise sometimes before daylight to do this, especially when I foresee the heavy weight of business during the day. And it all goes happily. I feel I enjoy it more and more and would willingly do it twice a day, but this is not possible."¹⁸

Another example: In Paris, where he had gone to preach, he met Madame Acarie, a married lady with six children, ably combining family work, business and contemplative life. She was a mystic and often went into ecstasy. She chose Francis de Sales as her confessor. He visited her regularly. He learnt

from her detachment from creatures and attachment to God through love of Him. After the death of her husband she joined the reformed Carmelites and took the name, Mary of the Incarnation. At her death he said, "What a mistake I made in not profiting enough from her conversation, for she was very willing to speak to me of all that went on in her soul, but the infinite respect which I had for her prevented me from asking any questions."¹⁹

5.3 Approachable

St. Jane de Chantal said of St. Francis de Sales in her testimony: "He was most approachable and very easy of access to anyone who wanted to talk to him. He received all comers with the same expression of quiet friendliness and never turned anyone away whatever his station in life; he always listened with unhurried calmness and for as long as people felt that they needed to talk. He was so patient and attentive that you would have thought that this was all he had to do."²⁰ In that way he made everyone feel at home in his presence, which made it easier for the directees to lay bare their consciences.

5.4 Humble

True humility is to know, acknowledge and live our real relationship to God. He knew his real identity. An example: When he moved to the new dwelling, graciously offered to him by Anthony Favre, his furniture was not enough to fill the new spacious halls. The Bishop insisted that his bed be placed in a small cubicle, though a number of rooms were free. When people asked him why, he said, "during the day I walk through the rooms of the house with the powerful on earth; during the night between four walls, I remind myself that I am no more than a miserable man. During the day I walk around as Archbishop of Geneva, during the night I retire as Francis de

Sales.”²¹ It is this humility that endeared people to him. It is this humility that made him a co-searcher with the directee.

5.5 Open to the will of God

He would not rush to take the role of spiritual direction unless it was clear to him that it was the will of God, as he would not rush to give solutions to problems without praying a lot. He gave primacy of place to discern the will of God in the lives of his directees.

CONCLUSION

Man’s ultimate goal is to know and be with God. God is Spirit. And God lets Himself be known and experienced through nature, persons and events. There is nothing in the world through which He does not speak if only we had the eyes to see, ears to hear and the heart to acknowledge. In this world of the Spirit, one needs to be guided to recognise God working in one’s own self, in other persons and in the world. That’s where the spiritual guide becomes an indispensable help. St. Francis de Sales has been a guide for many precisely in this sense. May the rare species of spiritual directors become ever less rare.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. Michael de la Bedoyere, *Francois de Sales* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1960), 29-30.

² Cf. Bedoyere, 32-33.

³ Cf. Bedoyere, 35-36.

⁴ Bedoyere, 37-38.

⁵ E. J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, Volume II, tr. Rory O’Sullivan (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1987), 262.

⁶ Cf. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trs. & eds. Antony Mookenthottam, Armind Nazareth, Antony Kolencherry

(Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2005), 19.

⁷ Summarised from Antony Mookenthottam, “St. Francis de Sales and Spiritual Direction” *Apostolate According to St. Francis de Sales*, ed. Antony Kolencherry (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1983), 95-98.

⁸ Cf. Bedoyere, 125-127; cf. John Lens, *A Drop of Honey: Stories from the Life of St. Francis of Sales* (Hyderabad: Don Bosco Publications, 2003), 91-96.

⁹ Cf. Bedoyere, 149.

¹⁰ As quoted by Bedoyere, 112-113

¹¹ Summarised from Lajeunie, 265-275.

¹² De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 42.

¹³ De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 43.

¹⁴ Cf. De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 44.

¹⁵ Cf. De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 29.

¹⁶ Cf. De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 30.

¹⁷ Cf. Bedoyere, 149-150.

¹⁸ Bedoyere, 162.

¹⁹ Bedoyere, 97.

²⁰ Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, Vol II, tr. Ivo Carneiro (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1998), xiii.

²¹ Lens, 113.
